NATION, WORLD + SOCIETY

Archivist finds long-lost recording of Martin Luther King Jr. speech at UCLA

Dr. King's voice from 1965 can now be heard online

Martin Luther King Jr. speaks at UCLA in 1965

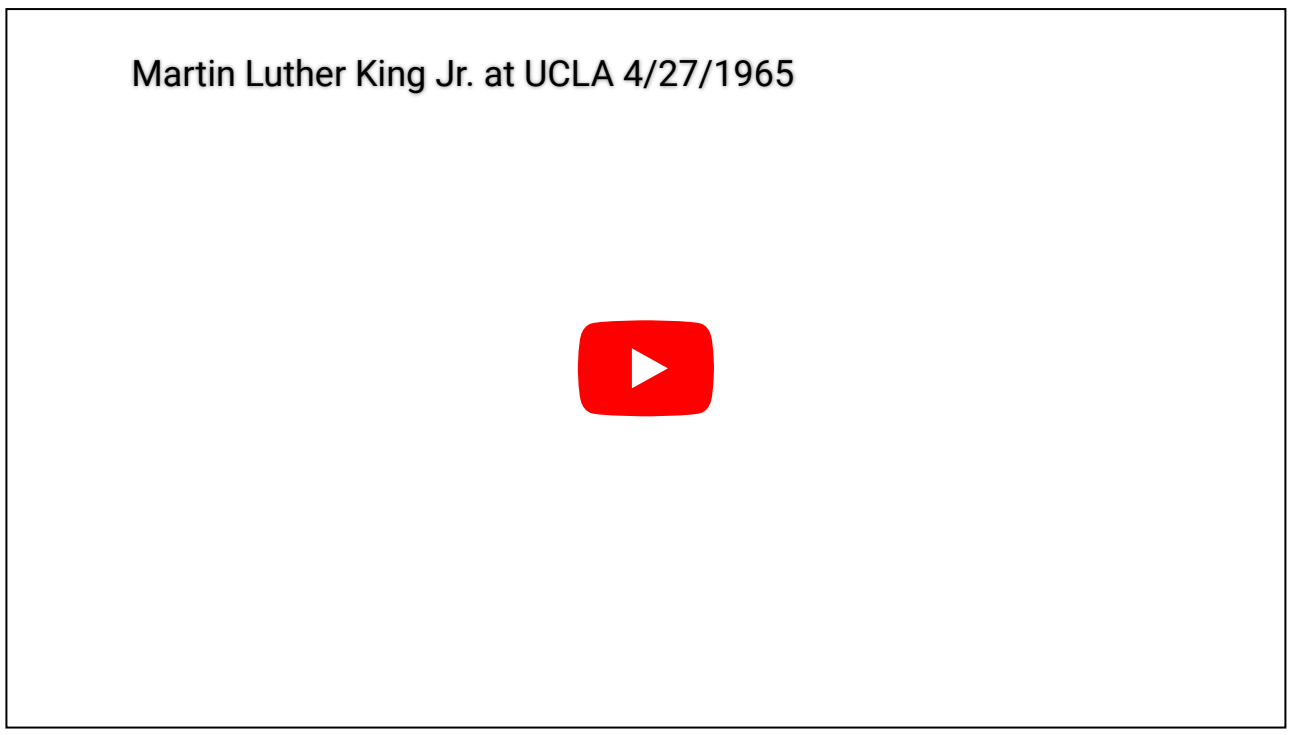
UCLA

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at UCLA about a month after his triumphant march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, that made civil rights history.

Meg Sullivan | January 15, 2015

Clarification posted Jan. 21: The UCLA Library also has recordings of the speech in its collection, available for listening by special arrangement but not online.

A long-lost audio recording of a 50-year-old speech delivered at UCLA by the late civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. has been unearthed in a storage room in the communication studies department, which will put it online. The 55-minute speech (embedded below) will go live today on King's birthday, four days before the national holiday honoring him.



"It's a speech of importance that deserves to be released on a day of importance," said Derek Bolin, a 2013 UCLA graduate who found the recording while working as a contract archivist. Over the years, King's visit to UCLA became a proud part of campus lore. The spot where the civil rights leader stood to deliver his speech, at the base of Janss Steps, is now marked with a plaque and is a stopping point on some campus tours.

The speech, recorded originally on 7-inch, reel- to-reel tapes, will become part of the UCLA Communication Studies Speech Archive, an online collection of more than 400 speeches delivered on campus by politicians, activists, entertainment personalities and other newsmakers primarily during the 1960s and '70s. Like King, the speakers were brought to campus by UCLA's now-defunct Associated Students Speakers Program. With donations from alumni, the department began last year to digitize the speeches and upload them to YouTube. So far, more than 180,000 listeners have tapped into the online archive.

The timing of the speech is significant. King delivered it on April 27, 1965, one month and two days after the triumphant march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, that is depicted so movingly in the new biopic "Selma." The film's director, Ava Marie DuVernay, majored in English at UCLA in the early 1990s.

The march and protests leading up to it paved the way for passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The federal legislation that prohibits racial discrimination in voting was signed into law four months after King's UCLA visit, said Paul Von Blum, a senior lecturer in the department and in African American studies, who participated in the civil rights movement as a young man.

"It's tremendously important," Von Blum said of the speech. "It shows that Dr. King recognized that American universities were crucial in the movement for social justice. Students, especially at elite universities, were kind of the foot soldiers of the movement."

The audio recording would have been completely forgotten had Bolin not noticed King's name on a list of campus speakers. Tapes of the speech weren't in the two cabinets that stored the recordings of the 365-plus speeches he had already processed. So he scoured the storage room where tape reels had languished for decades. Eventually, he found a cabinet that had been hidden from view by

shelving, old beta players and other out-of-date audiovisual equipment.

“I thought I really needed to go back and dig out that cabinet,” recalled Bolin. Moving everything else aside and searching through materials, he finally struck gold: three copies of the MLK speech. “I was like, ‘Yes!’”

Bolin thought he was home-free at that point, but he discovered one copy started too late in the speech and the other was hardly audible. So Bolin reluctantly set out to digitize the master, worrying constantly that he might accidentally destroy it. “With a 7-inch, reel-to-reel player, things can go bad quickly,” he said.

And they did. The tape kept sliding off track, and no amount of tinkering with his vintage AKAI player — an eBay purchase — seemed to improve the situation.

Then he got another lucky break. Rosemary Danon, who is semi-retired from the entertainment industry, read a newspaper account of Bolin’s efforts, contacted the department and offered to donate a high-end, reel-to-reel TEAC player she had purchased some 35 years ago. After a few spritzes of WD-40, Bolin was able to get the player to perform perfectly.

“I had never sold it or given it away,” Danon commented. “I couldn’t imagine anyone appreciating it. So it’s almost like my TEAC waited quietly all these years until it was truly needed.”

Department chair Tim Groeling researched the speech and found it was very similar to others King had given on campuses all across the country at that time.

“In 1965,” said Bolin, “he had a basic stump speech and had gotten very good at giving it, to the point where it became an oratorical tour de force. Listening to his booming voice and confidence, it struck me that the wisdom seeping out of him was something you’d expect from someone in his 60s or 70s. But he was only 36. That was really impressive to me.”

At the time, King’s career was at its pinnacle, Von Blum said. It was the year after King had won the Nobel Peace Prize following the successful passage of the Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin. But it also came just as his nonviolent approach was about to be eclipsed by more aggressive tactics used by others.

“In 1965, a lot of people in the civil rights movement had become restless about the lack of progress,” Von Blum said. “So there was an increasing militancy to the movement.” Just four months after his speech, the Watts riots broke out, causing King to return to Los Angeles to address this outbreak of violence . Three years after he spoke at UCLA, King was assassinated at a Memphis, Tennesee, motel.

In his Westwood speech, King addressed the need for not just allowing African Americans to play a greater role in determining their own political destiny, but also in sharing in the country’s prosperity.

“When people are walking the streets hungry and they have no jobs, and they see life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign, they become bitter,” he warned.

Yet, King expressed optimism that change was on its way: “Yes, we shall overcome, and I have faith in the future because I know somehow that, although the arc of the universe is long, it bends toward justice.”

For Von Blum, the best part is the ending, which includes the phrase, “Free at last, free at last,” which comes from an old Negro spiritual. King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech ended the same way, said Von Blum, who saw him deliver it at the 1963 March on Washington.

“I remember those words so powerfully,” Von Blum said. “They will be etched in my consciousness until I draw my last breath on this planet.”

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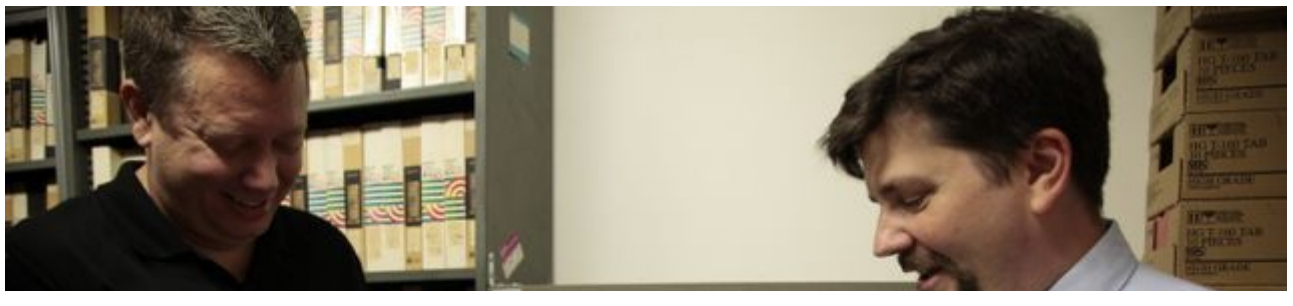

Christelle Snow/UCLA

Derek Bolin (left) and Tim Groeling look at old recordings of speeches given on campus by a wide range of newsmakers.

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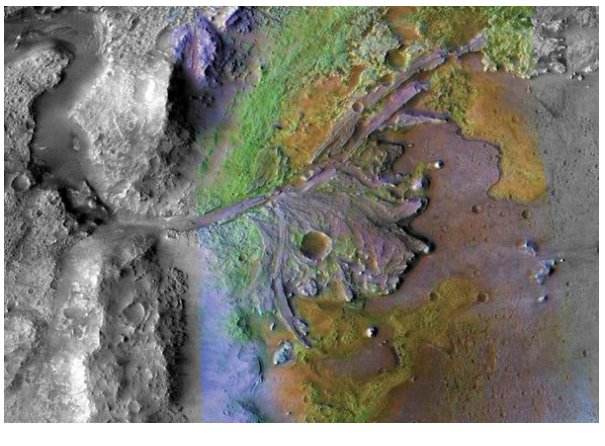

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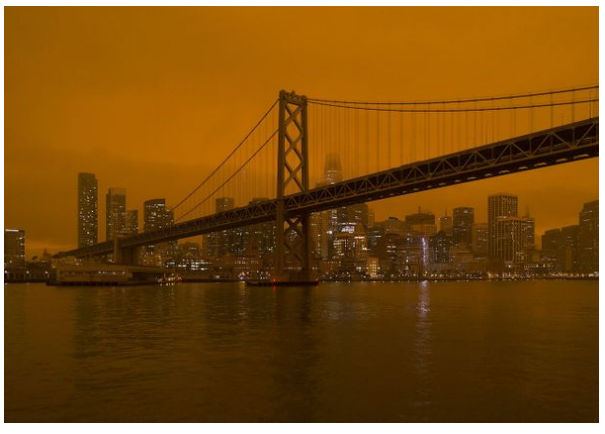

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